

## Success Story: Parent-Teacher Conferences

Principal Betsy Baker of Parkade Elementary School in Columbia, Missouri, says, “The key to success in parent involvement is not to view it as a one-shot deal.” Baker and her staff have found that building relationships with parents leads to increased participation in parent conferences.

Contact with parents starts during the summer with short home visits by teachers. *Meet the Teacher Night* allows families to see their child’s classroom before school begins.

September’s schedule includes *Get the Scoop Night* (an ice cream social) and usually a family math and reading night. By conference time, “it may be the fourth or fifth time teachers and parents have met,” Baker says.

Nothing is left to chance. Newsletters

advertise conferences several weeks in advance. “Sometimes, we even put stickers on the children—at least the younger ones.”

Other strategies also increase participation in conferences. Many of the parents don’t have transportation. But that’s no excuse. The school employs a “home-school communicator” who will drive to a home and pick parents up.

Even with all this planning and effort, some parents can’t make it to the school. “So we go to them,” Baker says.

The persistence pays off. Virtually every family—roughly 95 percent—participates in the conferences. “Parents know we’re very persistent,” Baker observes. “Sometimes, they may think it’s easier to show up!”



### Make It Work For You

Try these seven ways to boost attendance at parent conferences:

1. **Start building relationships now.** Make sure most parents have already met their child’s teacher several times before parent-teacher conferences. That reduces some of the anxiety that may keep parents away.
2. **Adjust your schedule.** Teachers work one evening in exchange for a half-day off the next day. Evening hours make it possible for many more working parents to attend. Teachers should also be willing to schedule conferences in the days before and after the “official” conference dates.
3. **Showcase student work.** It’s another reason parents will want to come to school. For one conference, Parkade’s art teacher fills the gym with student artwork—one project from each student. Parents stop by to see their child’s work on display.
4. **Provide incentives.** “We also try to have ‘freebies’ from our local businesses to give away to parents who come to conferences,” Baker says.
5. **Communicate widely.** In addition to the regular school communications, Parkade Elementary School also works with local churches to include a reminder announcement in church bulletins.
6. **Create a festive atmosphere.** From the balloons outside the building to the refreshments while parents are waiting, Parkade does everything possible to create a warm and welcoming environment for parents.
7. **Make conferences part of your overall outreach.** “Our goal is to have all parents engaged,” Baker says.

## Success Story: Helping Parents of At-Risk Students

Many parents who work two jobs, don't speak English, or don't read well themselves, can find helping with homework a challenge. The Newburgh Enlarged City School District, located 60 miles north of New York City, makes a special effort to resolve these concerns.

"Parents who are new to this country don't always understand their role," says Carmen Vazquezteell, who directs the school district's bilingual program. "In their home country, there may not have been an expectation that parents should help—or even that parents could ask questions of the school."

She helped Latino parents organize the Comité de Padres Hispanos (Committee of Hispanic Parents). Working from a list of topics the parents develop, she offers six workshops throughout the year.



"We have a reading program where we talk about ways parents can read to their children. If they aren't comfortable reading in English, we encourage them to read in Spanish. We tell them they can help their children just by turning off the TV and providing a supervised quiet time," she says.

But parents set the agenda. When parents wanted to know more about immigration, Vazquezteell brought in lawyers who could address the issue. She's also planned sessions on bicycle safety and gang involvement. All sessions are conducted in Spanish or are translated.

The district pays teachers to staff an after-school homework help center in a local public library. There's always at least one bilingual teacher available, and parents can drop by to learn how to help their kids.

### Make It Work For You

1. Recognize that all parents want the best for their children. Most immigrant parents share a strong desire for their children to receive a better education than they did. They may not understand the role they need to play, but they are motivated to help.
2. Understand that non-school issues can have a big impact on a student's performance. That's why the Comité de Padres Hispanos scheduled a session on immigration. "Many of our students were born here—they are citizens," Vazquezteell says. "But if they are worried because their parent is afraid of the law, they won't be able to focus on their studies."
3. Remember the real estate maxim, "Location, location, location." Newburgh's homework help program is successful partly because it is located in the city's public library, located in the middle of a neighborhood where many Latino families live. That allows children to walk when their parents are still at work.
4. Work with other community agencies. The partnership with the local library provides many benefits for students. The library often sponsors reading programs during the after-school homework help time. Younger children can listen to a story while their older siblings get help with history or math.
5. Offer parents what they need. In addition to the program on immigration, the district sponsors ESL classes, GED classes in both English and Spanish, and citizenship classes.